



# research reveals...

an update on gambling research in ALBERTA

## About The Alberta Gaming Research Institute

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province. The Institute's identified research domains include bio-psychological and health care, socio-cultural, economic, and government and industry policy and practice. The Institute aims to achieve international recognition in gaming-related research. It is coordinated by a Board of Directors working in collaboration with the Alberta Gaming Research Council. The Ministry of Alberta Gaming provides funding to the Institute.

### OUR MISSION:

**To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society**

Your comments and queries are welcome either by e-mail [abgaming@ualberta.ca](mailto:abgaming@ualberta.ca) or phone 780.492.2856.

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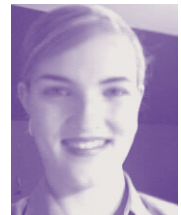
## A growing expertise: graduate students and gaming research

WHILE GAMING RESEARCH is still in its relative infancy, there are signs that more and more highly trained individuals are pursuing research into this complex area. Many of the research projects funded by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute involve graduate students who are co-investigators or research assistants, and who play important roles in designing, implementing, interpreting and following up on the projects. Three such people provided some insight into their involvement for Research Reveals.

**Meghan Davis** is completing her Master's degree in Medical Science within the Psychiatric Disorders Research Group at the University of Calgary, and will be attending Sam Houston State University to pursue her Master's in Clinical Psychology and Ph.D. in Forensic Clinical Psychology. Meghan was closely involved with the Institute-funded project *Prevention of pathological gambling* (working with Principal Investigator Rob Williams of the University of Lethbridge), for which she designed a prevention program containing elements deemed to be important to prevent problem gambling in adolescents, by instilling them with the knowledge to make informed decisions to gamble responsibly and providing them with the skills enabling them to do so.

**Kate Diskin** is pursuing a PhD in Clinical Psychology at the University of Calgary. She is among a growing number of graduate students who are expanding the field of gambling research in Alberta, often in projects funded by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. Her Master's thesis received an award from the American-based National Council on Problem Gambling. Kate has been closely involved with two projects funded by the Institute, *Psychophysiological response in video lottery gamblers*, which is a follow-up to research she did for her Master's degree; and *Effects of a single motivational intervention on problem gambling behaviour*. Motivational interviewing, she writes, is a directive, client centered technique that involves the client in a discussion of the good and not so good things about their behaviour in a non-judgmental context, allowing them to explore their ambivalence about what they are doing. Often gamblers do not seek treatment or do not remain in treatment. A single session might be helpful in engaging them in treatment or may assist in helping some people to change their behaviours.

In September 2002 **Chad Witcher** will commence a thesis-based M.A. within the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta, with a specialization in gerontology. He has been involved as a research assistant in the study *High Quality aging or gambling with health? The lifestyles of elders who play bingo*. The study asks three questions: (1) Who plays bingo after age 65? (2) What do elders believe they "get" out of playing bingo? (3) What are the day to day patterns of a "bingo lifestyle" and the implications for health and well-being? Chad's activities for the project included the organization of research data into more meaningful units (i.e. tables and figures) as well as conducting quantitative (ANOVAs, multiple regression) and qualitative (case analysis, pattern coding) data analyses.



Meghan Davis



Kate Diskin



Chad Witcher

When asked about the status of gambling research in general and in Alberta universities in particular, responses bore a common thread: the work so far has been promising but more needs to be done, especially multidisciplinary research. Kate Diskin, for example, feels that gambling research is likely at the same stage now as alcohol-related research was a few decades ago. "As we all know, the increasing availability of gambling has resulted in both more people with problems and a higher profile for the industry as a whole. It is only natural that people want answers and want them right away and I think that we need to continue with treatment related research, but I also feel that we need to continue with more basic research and with efforts to develop clearer understandings of the etiology of gambling problems."

Like Kate, Meghan Davis believes that more research needs to be done into the origins and causes of gambling, particularly to validate the assumed hypotheses about the causes of problem gambling. Although attempts have been made to delineate the pathways which lead to gambling-related problems, she notes, "these hypotheses are unwarranted without the necessary research designs and knowledge to be gained from them. This issue is particularly important given that ... individuals with gambling problems [often] commence gambling at a very early age."

From Chad Witcher's perspective, most of the research he has reviewed focuses on the negative aspects of gambling. Because his work on the bingo project was his first foray into gambling-related research, he says that his awareness of the broader issues of gaming research is limited. But based on what he has read, he suggests that a shift in focus to include the positive aspects of gambling, and its possible contribution to well-being may serve to encourage and expand future gambling-related research.

Do these students plan to continue gambling-related research? At this point Chad says that he intends to focus on gerontology issues that do not necessarily involve gaming, but could be interested in future projects examining the relationship between gambling and the elderly. Meghan and Kate, however, intend to continue research into gambling. Meghan plans to pursue gambling research in a

forensic context. Specifically, she says, she'd like to further investigate the relationship between gambling and crime, with a view to determining the societal costs of gambling. Kate has been involved in gambling related research since her undergraduate degree, and she intends to continue in this area after she receives her doctorate. She has published two articles on attention in VLT play and has submitted an article for publication based on her Master's research.

Kate will follow up the results of her current projects, but until the results are in and interpreted, she can't say specifically what course the follow-up will take. As far as the motivational interview study is concerned, if it appears that a single motivational intervention is useful, the research could focus on discovering in what populations and under what circumstances this could be used (e.g. social workers, doctors, or other professionals). This will be the subject of her PhD dissertation.

Meghan too sees important follow-up questions that need to be answered with respect to her *Prevention of pathological gambling* project. For example, can greater behavioural change – that is, reductions in gambling – be obtained from intervening at an earlier age, perhaps at the level of junior high or elementary school? Would program length impact upon the effectiveness of the prevention program? Which specific elements of the prevention program are the most effective at reducing gambling behaviors or, conversely, is it the combination of all of the elements which makes the prevention program effective?

Clearly, there is no shortage of research issues begging to be addressed, and the insights provided by Kate Diskin, Meghan Davis and Chad Witcher are a good indication of the depth of knowledge that already exists amongst graduate students involved in gaming research. So just how can the Alberta Gaming Research Institute promote graduate student participation in this field? All three of the people interviewed suggested that the Institute dedicate specific funds to graduate assistantships for research into gaming issues, across many disciplines. "I have been fortunate in receiving scholarships from other funding agencies," says Kate, "but I think that it would be very useful for the Institute to develop funding

opportunities for Master's and Ph.D. level students."

Meghan suggests that awareness-raising in general about problem gambling would aid in attracting graduate students to the area. This could consist simply of the incorporation of a gambling-related component in various courses. Chad and Meghan also said that publications such as *Research Reveals*, by profiling graduate students, help increase interest in gaming research. Chad suggested as well that a research-oriented conference which specifically "showcases" the work of graduate students and research assistants might also be useful. As well, the appointment of a graduate student/research assistant representative by the Institute, who serves as a liaison between the Institute and the students or assistants, could help promote gambling research by graduate students.

As was noted, gaming research is just emerging as a distinct research discipline, but already much has been done, in Alberta and worldwide. Equally clearly, much more remains to be done, and the enthusiasm and potential exhibited through graduate student participation in gaming related research is significant and full of promise.

## Updates and Activities

The following items are now available at the Alberta Gaming Research Institute website ([www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca](http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca)):

- 2002/03 Research Grant Guidelines & Application forms. Application deadline to the respective University research grants office is Friday, June 21, 2002
- 2002-05 Business Plan
- April 2002 Status reports for 2000-2001 research grants
- 2001/02 Report Card for the Alberta Gaming Research Institute

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